DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 135 020 CS 501 604

AUTHOR Kneupper, Charles W.
TITLE A Theory of Adaptation for Readers Theatre.
PUB DATE [76]
NOTE 13p.; Study prepared at The Univeristy of Texas at San Antonio

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Creative Reading; Interpretive Reading; Literary Analysis; *Literature; *Readers Theater; *Scripts; Theater Arts

ABSTRACT

In attempting the delicate task of adapting literature for Readers Theatre presentation, adapters must recognize two essential points: the importance of creating a script capable of effective presentation and the necessity of maintaining the integrity of the literature--those features contributing to the work's unique, unifying, and distinctive character. Keeping these points in mind, adapters can evaluate their options (omission of scenes, characters, dialogue, and so forth) when creating a script from any literary genre. (JM)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

ED135020

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

A THEORY OF ADAPTATION FOR READERS THEATRE

BY

CHARLES W. KNEUPPER

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Charles W. Kneupper

TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER."

Charles W. Kneupper, (Ph.D., BGSU, 1973)
is Assistant Professor of Communication
at The University of Texas at San Antonio

CS 501 604

The task of adapting literature for Readers Theatre presentation is a delicate artistic endeavor. Unfortunately the quantity of literature providing direction for the adapter is quite small. Further, though published suggestions, guidelines, or principles are of some assistance to the adapter, their utility is limited insofar as available materials are not explicitly grounded in a broad theoretical perspective which would serve to explain the rationale behind current recommendations. It is the intention of this article to suggest a basic theory of adaptation which will provide fundamental criteria which the adapter can utilize in making systematic decisions concerning adaptation.

There are two fundamental objectives which should be realized in any adaptation. First, adaptation should produce a script which is capable of effective presentation. Second, adaptation should maintain the integrity of the literature. These two objectives are applicable to any literary genre being considered for Readers Theatre presentation. They provide guidance for the adapter insofar as they allow him to evaluate his options (ommission of scenes, characters, dialogue, etc.) in terms of the extent to which such acts contribute to achieving those objectives.

Effective Readers Theatre Presentation

What constitutes a script capable of effective Readers Theatre presentation? As we are concerned with a script potentially capable of effective presentation, we must initially concern ourselves with the

question of what makes Readers Theatre effective. Though many scripts of various styles and literary genres have been successfully produced at least two factors seem crucial to the effectiveness of any Readers Theatre presentation. Leslie Coger noted one of these factors in writing that in Interpreters Theatre action "happens in the minds of the audience."[1] The idea of action occuring within the minds of the audience has also been noted by Jeré Veilleux. With Readers Theatre in mind as an aspect of oral interpretation, he wrote that "the audience mentally re-creates the images of the literature in response to the oral cues of the interpreter."[2] Further this mental recreation of images is a distinguishing feature of oral interpretation and thereby Readers Theatre. Veilleux indicates that "interpretation is the only performing art that attempts primarily to evoke the imaging capacities of its audience."[3] The ability of a production to evoke the imaging capacities of the audience seems clearly related to any evaluation of its effectiveness. Most Readers Theatre conventions are intended to promote these imaging capacities of the audience. But the effectiveness of these conventions will be limited by a poorly adapted script.

Obviously the adapter has no control over the conventions of Readers Theatre, nor the manner in which they serve to enhance audience imagination. But, the adapter must be thoroughly familiar with these conventions, because it is through them that the literature he adapts must be presented. The adapter selects, arranges and modifies the literature which the interpreters will present as a stimulus to the

audience's imagination through the conventions of Readers Theatre.

A second factor involved in effective presentation is somewhat elusive: effective Readers Theatre presentation pleases the audience. Certainly the director or cast members in any theatrical or interpretative venture feel a desire to please the audience. Equally, audience members evaluate a performance partially on the basis of its pleasurable attraction. This is not to indicate that the audience needs to like the production. On the contrary, the audience may well feel a fascinated repulsion towards the production. The particular type of audience response should be appropriate to the pleasurable qualities of the literature interpreted, which may vary from amusement to catharsis to tragic pleasure.

Often pleasure will be closely connected with the audience's imaging. Certainly, imaging provides the auditor with an opportunity for a distinctly personalized experience. While imaging may be a necessary condition for pleasing the audience, it is not a sufficient condition as one can be imaging while bored, impatient or displeased. Presumably, there is some optimum level of imaging that is necessary in Readers Theatre if the audience is to be pleased.

The factors which may prevent a pleasurable response from the audience range from distractions such as external noise, inconsistent focus or poorly paced interpretation to poorly selected and poorly adapted literature. While the adapter cannot control possible distraction which originate from sources other than the adapted script, it is the responsibility of the adapter to produce a script which

allows and promotes a unified, vital, and effectively paced presentation. While the achievement of such a presentation rests primarily with the director, the script from which he works can maximize, retard or thwart his efforts.

The Integrity of the Literature

The integrity of the literature refers to those features which give a work of literature its unique, unifying and distinctive character. In any particular case these features can be determined through an analysis of the substance, form and style of the literature. In terms of substance, the integrity of most literature can be gauged at the thematic level. For instance, in evaluating an adaptation of a play one might start by asking: what was the major dramatic question of the play? If the adaptation does not ask the major dramatic question, resolves it differently, or reaches the same resolution for substantively different reasons than the original, the integrity of the literature has clearly been violated.

In regard to form, if the structure of a play has been incongruously reordered in the adaptation, such that Act III is present first, Act I second, and Act II last, the integrity of the literature has clearly been violated. Both substance (theme) and form (structure) must be maintained in the adaptation of any literary genre since they give the literature its unifying and distinctive characteristics.

Style encompasses both the substance and form of the work, but goes

beyond them to add, through various techniques, the particular attitudes and emotional weightings which make the work unique. When a poem laments "mans inhumanity to man," and an adaptation only observes that men are inhumane to each other, the adaptation has violated the integrity of the literature.

In violating the integrity of the literature the adapter simultaneously violated the intent of the author and the intent of the literature. However, it is possible to violate the intent of the author and literature while maintaining the integrity of the work. Because this is possible, it is crucial for the adapter to distinguish between these three concepts, see their inter-relationships, and know when he is justified in violating the intent of the author or literature.

The integrity of the literature attempts to focus on those aspects of the literature which are essential to the identity of the work. It's maintainence suggests that the adapter is primarily concerned with retaining and conveying those aspects of the literature which are most significant. Obviously what is essential will vary greatly from genre to genre and to a somewhat lesser extent from author to author and work to work in a given genre. Thus, it is advisable for an adapter to study the particular literary genre and author in order to familiarize himself with the various characteristics of the genre, and the specific techniques of the author. Such familiarity will tend to improve the adapters insight into the literature and his recognition of the essential qualities of the work.

The integrity of the literature can be distinguished from the intent

of the author and the intent of the literature in that the latter concepts include both essential and non-essential material in regard to the identity of the work. In order to accommodate literature to the medium of Readers Theatre it may be necessary to eliminate some non-essential aspects of the literature in order to effectively present the essential aspects of the literature. An adapter is justified in eliminating non-essential aspects of the literature--and thus violating the intent of the author and the literature--only to the extent that such violations are necessary to accommodate the literature to effective Readers Theatre presentation.

Those critics who concern themselves with the intent of the author operate under at least three assumptions. They are that "the creative artist had certain definite intentions; it is possible to know what these intentions were; the intentions of the author must be communicated to the audience."[4] Even though an author may have intentions which we can know and communicate, these intentions do not necessarily have any bearing on the integrity of the literature. For example, the author may not have succeeded in doing what he intended to do. His intentions may have been highly personal, and his private meaning for the work may be very different from the public meaning of his literature. While on one level the intent of the author may have no correlation with the integrity of the literature, on a different level it might be a relevant factor. For example, even though an author may not achieve the effect he intended, it seems meaningful to say that he did intend to use the symbolism, incidents, and language

arrangements which are observable in his work. When the adapter changes words, omits incidents or inverts arrangements, he is doing things that the author did not intend to do, and thus he clearly violates the intentions of the author. However, it does not necessarily follow that he has violated the integrity of the literature. That would depend on whether those changes altered some effect essential to the work as a whole.

Somewhat in contrast with a focus on the intention of the author is the viewpoint which focuses on the intent of the literature. Obviously, the literature cannot intend to do anything, though it does draw a response from its readers. The response drawn is considered appropriate to the literary stimulus, and in that sense intended by the literature. This perspective is of considerable value to the adapter and interpreter in that it frees him from possible narrow restrictions imposed by the intent of the author and enables him "to find intrinsic evidence to support his concepts of intention."[5] When the adapter changes words, omits incidents, or inverts arrangement, has he violated the intent of the literature? Probably, since any effect which the literature creates is intended, and any change in the literary stimulus would to some extent alter the readers response, nonetheless such acts of accomodation with their attendant consequences do not necessarily violate the integrity of the literature. That would depend on whether those changes alter some effect essential to the work as a whole.

Concurrent achievement: the limits of justification

Considering violations more specifically, one may recall that the change or omission of a word can be considered a violation of the intent of the author. However, tags such as "he said" of "she said angrily" can be cut justifiably, because they would probably inhibit effective presentation and thus require adaptation if the adapter is to produce a script capable of effective presentation. But secondly, these tags can be provided non-verbally to the audience in the act of presentation and thus are not essential to the literature during oral performance. Other changes in word choice for the sake of clarity, and sentence structure for the sake of fluent delivery seem generally justifiable provided that they are necessary for effective presentation and closely approximate the meaning found in the original work.

In regard to the intent of the literature, the adapter should avoid major violations whenever possible. In omitting, changing, or adding characters or dialogue, the adapter will affect the response of the audience to the literature. These changes may diminish or intensify the strength of the response or it may change the nature of the response. Changes in intensity can result from changing the tense of the verbs in order to create an illusion of immediacy which can enhance the effectiveness of a Readers Theatre presentation. The substitution of a narrative summary for a scene, or the compression of a narrative summary to its essential details can be justified in the interest of maintaining and varying pace and thereby holding audience attention. Changes in intensity providing that they are kept

within appropriate limits seem justified.

On the other hand, changes in the nature of the response is tantamount to creating a new and variant literary effect and would rarely be justifiable. Usually such a change would violate the integrity of the work with regard to substance. Certainly, reversing the intent of the literature would never be justifiable. One possible justification for a change in the nature of the responses would argue that (1) the original effect could not effectively be presented, (2) the created effect though different in nature is congruent with the integrity of the work, and (3) the necessities of effective presentation require this or an equivalent change in order to provide transition and maintain continuity. Unless all three parts of the justification are clearly present, the adapter should refrain from changing the nature of the response.

Summary

The basic objectives of adaptation are to create a script capable of effective presentation which also maintains the integrity of the literature. In order to form such a script, the accommodations that the adapter must make may occasionally require the violation of the intent of the author and the intent of the literature. While such violations may be justified by the necessities of oral presentation and do not violate the integrity of the work, the adapter should exercise discretion and restraint as the adaptation should resemble the original work insofar as the necessities of effective presentation allow.

Further, it should be recognized that if accommodations such as the adapter must make were not undertaken many literary works could not be produced with the effectiveness they deserve.

[1]Leslie Irene Coger. "Interpreters Theatre: Theatre of the Mind," The Quarterly Journal of Speech, XLIX No. 2 (April 1963), p. 156.

[2]Jeré Veilleux. "Toward a Theory of Interpretation," The Quarterly Journal of Speech, LV No. 2 (April 1969), p. 108.

[3]Ibid., p. 110.

[4]Paul Hunsinger. Communicative Interpretation. Doboque, Iowa: William C. Brown Company, Publishers, 1969, p. 39.

[5]Ibid., p. 40.